

Subject: Message from the Under Secretary -- Scientific Debate and
Transparency Within NOAA
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Message From the Under Secretary
October 3, 2006

Dear Colleagues,

Many of you have probably seen the latest reports concerning a document on Atlantic hurricanes and climate. I do not make it a practice to comment on every mischaracterization and falsehood in media reports.

However, reports that deal with the agency's scientific integrity strike directly at NOAA's mission and everything the agency does. Therefore, I believe strongly that we must confront them directly and correct them quickly.

Without the foundation of sound science, every decision, policy, and action at the agency can be called into question. Unfortunately, the mere perception of scientific stifling has the same damaging effect. As someone who believes wholeheartedly in NOAA's mission, its people and its work, I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure that NOAA stands for scientific integrity. As I've stated previously, peer-reviewed science speaks for itself and doesn't need me or anyone else to interpret or modify the results. For those of you who know me personally, you realize that I encourage and actively pursue vigorous debate on all topics, particularly including science related to NOAA's mission.

The latest round of news reports focus on an information sheet that was being prepared for this year's hurricane season rollout. The information sheet detailed the current state of the science on the recent increase in hurricane activity. There is currently a healthy debate in the scientific community inside and outside NOAA about whether recent increases are the result of natural cycles, climate change, or other circumstances. The information sheet was prepared and reviewed in a highly collaborative fashion by nearly 50 scientists across the entire spectrum of the debate and aimed to highlight this debate in an easy-to-understand public document.

Media reports have alleged that the document was blocked because it made a reference to work by NOAA scientists that found climate change may have an impact on increased hurricane activity. This charge is inaccurate. The information sheet summarized existing scientific research and findings and contained no new science. In fact, all the studies cited for the information sheet are publicly available on the NOAA website, making the charge that they would somehow now be suppressed all the more unfounded.

The information sheet in question has been posted on our website (PDF document: <http://hurricanes.noaa.gov/pdf/hurricanes-and-climate-change-09-2006.pdf>). I urge you to read the document so you can judge for yourself. As I tried to make clear to the media, my hope was that this process would be an exercise in scientists with different views coming together to answer important questions. While I fear an official science policy issued by the agency might have the effect of stifling this important debate, I completely support making the public aware of the state of the science.

We have established a process for encouraging further scientific debate and developing similar information sheets and we look forward to others coming out in the near future.

I reiterate my call to you to let me know personally if you ever feel like NOAA or DOC processes are not supporting the free flow of your or your colleagues' scientific research. Scientific integrity is critical to NOAA's credibility.

Sincerely,

Conrad Lautenbacher's Signature

Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr.

Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator